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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6164
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA IMMEDIATE 5734
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD IMMEDIATE 1030
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL IMMEDIATE 0385
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 0578
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000224

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR WALLER
DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/25/2019

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL SCUL SY

SUBJECT: QAMISHLI KURDS CELEBRATE NOWRUZ WITHOUT SARG
REPRISALS PART I OF II.

REF: A. 06 DAMASCUS 01297

1B. 07 DAMASCUS 00318

1C. 08 DAMASCUS 00203

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Qamishli's Kurds celebrated evening and daytime Nowruz events with only minor SARG harassment, as observed by PolEconoffs. Police and military presence was significant, but unlike last year, when three Kurds were killed and many others detained, there have been no reports of arrests in the Qamishli area. In Aleppo and Hasaka, however, police and security services reportedly broke up groups of reveling Kurds, detaining as many as 100 from Aleppo alone. Throughout the New Year celebrations, representatives of the Yeketi, Kurdish Future Movement, and the Kurdish Democratic Party sought to meet with us publicly despite constant scrutiny of the security services who "escorted" us throughout the delegation's stay. END SUMMARY

12. (C) Kurds throughout Syria gathered on the evening of March 20 and during the day of March 21 to celebrate the Kurdish New Year Celebration of "Nowruz." PolEconoffs joined with representatives of the UNDP, Norwegian, Finnish, Swedish, Canadian, and British embassies and traveled to Qamishli with the intention of observing a major cultural event and hoping our public presence might temper any heavy-handed SARG reaction to Nowruz Eve revelers. According to Herveen Osse (strictly protect), a leader in the Damascus branch of the Kurdish Future Movement, the major Kurdish party leaders were told by one of the participating embassies that a large diplomatic contingent was coming, though they had no particular information on which embassies. Speaking to Poloff before the event, she said, "I know you will not be able to come."

SARG'S THREATENING PRELUDE TO NOWRUZ 2009

13. (C) Since the March 12 Qamishli riots of 2004, the SARG has viewed Nowruz events as a threat to regime stability and it has reacted by aggressively confronting crowds and making large-scale arrests or standing by as the local Arab population assaulted them (ref A & B). In 2008, Syrian security forces reportedly attacked a crowd of Kurds after they had blocked a fire truck's access to a bonfire in the street. In the ensuing melee, shots were fired into the crowd and three Kurds were killed (ref C). In the aftermath

of these killings, few Kurds attended the Nowruz Day events for fear of continued SARG reprisals.

¶ 14. (C) In the weeks leading up to the Nowruz, the SARG warned some Kurdish leaders to avoid Nowruz celebrations, according to a Yeketi Party statement. The statement recounts how "Abdul Hamid Darwish, the Secretary of the Kurdish Progressive Democratic Party in Syria, and Ismail Omar, the General Secretary of the Kurdish Union Democratic Party in Syria, told their supporters to stay away from any party, promoting a culture of fear amongst Kurds to stop them from participating in the celebrations." In addition to reporting on the arrest of 30 Kurds in Aleppo who were commemorating the 2004 riots that resulted in the killing of approximately 25 Kurds, the Yeketi Party alleged Syrian intelligence services kidnapped two Kurds in Damascus: 27 year-old Fouad Hassan Hussein, from Durbassia, and Maher Sattam Hussein, a geography student at Damascus University. Dr. Abdul Hakeem Bashar, Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDP) told us during a March 20 dinner that 140 armed guards had verbally assaulted and dispersed 200 women gathered for an International Women's Day event on March 9 in Qamishli. He also said that "tent rentals" for the following day's events had been blocked by the government (traditionally, Nowruz Day is celebrated in the countryside with each family setting up a tent).

Nowruz Eve

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¶ 15. (C) By 1600 local, March 20, bonfires of piled tires and trash burned from every "tal" (a hill around which villages sometimes form) rising above the bright green fields of wheat and barley surrounding Qamishli. By sunset, candles lined the central street of Qamishli. Smaller tire-fires flared up on street corners and in empty lots throughout the city, drawing crowds of onlookers and, we observed, the attention of a mixed force of the Syrian Military Intelligence's (SMI) uniformed police, riot police, and mukhabarat (plain-clothed security services).

¶ 16. (C) SARG force details: We observed one large armored vehicle equipped with two water cannons operated by riot police. This traveled in advance of a large armored transport vehicle carrying between 30 and 40 SMI police armed with AK-47s and batons. These two vehicles were escorted by between six and 10 support cars, which were a combination of regular marked police vehicles and unmarked cars carrying plain-clothed security agents. This convoy roamed the city, putting out bonfires and projecting a show of force. There were also small groups of police pre-positioned throughout the city and approximately 50 mukhabarat stationed on the edge of a large Kurdish crowd that formed later that evening next to Amouda Mosque.

¶ 17. (C) By 2000 the number of Kurds in the area of the mosque had swelled to between 200-300 people. They stood on opposite sides of the street chanting "long live Kurdistan." A Kurdistan flag appeared briefly, but was replaced by multiple Syrian flags. An individual who appeared to be the ranking SMI officer, followed by a small cadre of uniformed and plain-clothed security agents, walked down the center of the street scanning the crowd and then peacefully engaged a group of celebrants in conversation. We were told by a local who was in earshot that the SMI officer told the crowd "we will give you tomorrow (Nowruz) to celebrate. Don't make any problems tonight." On his initial appearance, the crowd had booed the officer and his entourage, but when he entered the crowd and made this announcement, they began to cheer him and chant "With our soul, with our blood, we will defend you, Bashar." After appeasing the crowd, the officer approached the embassy delegation and asked who we were. We gave him our business cards, explained we were here to observe the

celebration, and that we would travel to various Nowruz sites the following day. We were welcomed by the officials, but informed that we should be aware we were "attracting a crowd." Though we were not asked to leave the area, we departed soon after SMI, which, in turn, led to the immediate dissipation of the crowd.

¶8. (C) During the Nowruz Eve events, embassy representatives were repeatedly approached by Kurds who thanked us for our presence and told that our presence had made the evening celebration "safer." We heard the same message the following day from Messud Akko (strictly protect) and various Kurdish party representatives who stated that while attendance at the two Nowruz events we observed was smaller than in years past, more people had turned out than expected. The reason for this, we were told, was because people felt our attendance would deter any SARG interference.

ARRESTS IN HASAKA AND ALEPPO

¶9. (C) After the Nowruz Eve celebration, the entire diplomatic delegation joined Dr. Abdul Hakeem Bashar for dinner in a local restaurant. We learned that police had broken up crowds of Kurds in Hasaka and Aleppo. He reported that security forces had arrested five people in Hasaka, including Suliman Oso, a leader in the Political Committee of the Yeketi Party and the brother of Mustafa Oso, president of the Kurdish Human Rights Committee (DAD). He added that "many arrests" had taken place in Aleppo and reiterated what others had told us all evening--namely, our presence had served as a deterrent not only to excessive behavior by security forces, but also by Kurdish revelers. We later learned from DAD council member Muhammad Khalil (strictly protect) 150 people were arrested in Aleppo on Nowruz Eve, 70 of whom would probably be prosecuted.

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¶10. (C) COMMENT: We assume SARG security was aware of our visit in advance given the widespread foreknowledge among the Kurds, though we cannot be entirely sure. It is perhaps coincidental, though noteworthy, that as far as we know arrests occurred on Nowruz Eve in nearly every city with large Kurdish populations except Qamishli. END COMMENT.
CONNELLY